University of North Carolina Press

Chapter Title: Jesus, Christianity, and Superhumanity
Chapter Author(s): Bernd Magnus

Book Title: Studies in Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition
Book Editor(s): JAMES C. O'FLAHERTY, TIMOTHY F. SELLNER, ROBERT M. HELM
Published by: University of North Carolina Press. (1985)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469656557_oflaherty.18

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/. Funding is provided by Humanities Open Book Program, National Endowment for the Humanities, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

University of North Carolina Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Studies in Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition*

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

XV. Jesus, Christianity, and Superhumanity

Bernd Magnus

In this paper I shall not be concerned with the emergence, development, and modifications of Nietzsche's opinions about Christianity and the Judaeo-Christian tradition.* I shall concentrate instead on certain conceptual/structural features of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity and the religious impulse generally, features that motivate not only his antichristianity, in my opinion, but his critique of morality and metaphysics as well. Put briefly, I am attempting to understand, however indirectly, Nietzsche's suggestive remark in *Beyond Good and Evil* that "Christianity is Platonism for 'the people' (*für's 'Volk'*)."[1] To accomplish this I shall have to say something about his understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, "original" Christianity, Paul, and later Christianity, before attempting to relate that discussion to other themes in Nietzsche's philosophical arsenal of which I believe his religious discussion to be only one expression. Superhumanity, *Übermenschlichkeit*, shall serve as the contrast term for this attempt.

The first important contrast to be marked concerning Christianity is Nietzsche's insistent separation of Jesus the evangel from the Pauline Christ. Put more generally, this distinction becomes roughly equivalent to his contrast between Jesus and Christianity. Although he himself may have put this contrast most pithily, as when he wrote, for example, ". . . in truth there was only *one* Christian and he died on the cross,"[2] Nietzsche was scarcely alone among the prescient nineteenth-century thinkers for whom this contrast is so basic—the names of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky spring immediately to mind. Nor was Nietzsche's often violent prose rhetorically more extreme or severe than, say, that of Kierkegaard. Consider the in-

*This paper was made possible through the support of the Academic Senate of the University of California, Riverside; the National Endowment for the Humanities; and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. I am grateful to each institution.

1. *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface. Whenever possible I will refer to the title, section, and/or aphorism number when I quote Nietzsche, for the reader's convenience. Only in the troubling case of material from the *Nachlaß* will this procedure be abandoned.

2. *The Antichrist* (hereafter "A"), sec. 39.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

flammatory lines written by Kierkegaard on the occasion of the succession of Bishop Martensen as Primate of the Church of Denmark. Bishop Mynster, the previous Primate of the Danish Church, had died only recently, and then-*Professor* Martensen had delivered the funeral oration, in which he referred to Bishop Mynster as "a genuine witness to the truth." That phrase was to prove to be more than Kierkegaard could bear; for it deprived the notion of its martyrdom and apostolic purity. To be sure, Bishop Mynster had been a respected, successful prelate; he had received every conceivable honor; he had been a learned humanist; but he was also a man of means, comfortable in and with the world. For Kierkegaard, to call such a person a witness to the truth mocks Christianity, slanders and usurps the Gospels; so he waited several months until Professor Martensen had in his turn succeeded Bishop Mynster as Church Primate, and then he seized the moment and published these remarks —extreme even for him—in the year before his own death: "A witness to the truth is a man who bears witness in destitution, in poverty, in disgrace and humiliation, a man despised, detested, insulted, outraged, flouted; a man who is beaten, tortured, dragged from prison to prison, and then at last . . . crucified, decapitated, burnt at the stake, or roasted on a grille, and thrown on the trash heap by the executioner, without burial. . . . In truth, there is something more contrary to Christianity than any heresy or any schism—and that is to play at Christianity, to scamp its dangers. . . ."[3]

If Nietzsche's often polemical hostility toward what passes for Christianity displays a marked resemblance to Kierkegaard's, as quoted above, his reasons for rejecting Christianity and any religious tradition generally are at a far remove from Kierkegaard's. Kierkegaard's indictment of Christianity is rooted in the contrast between the unconditional acceptance of the incomprehensible absurdity that is required of the knight of faith on the one hand—the leap of faith stripped of any taint of comfort or assurance—and the genteel social-club security sought by typical Christian "believers," on the other hand. The primordial content of the religious experience had been buried and forgotten, Kierkegaard certainly thought; but it would never have occurred to him to challenge its absolute validity. Hence Kierkegaard's contemptuous dismissal of the shallow religious institutions and practices of his contemporaries. Yet it is precisely the unconditional validity of this primordial content, which Kierkegaard

3. Denis de Rougemont, *Love Declared* (New York: Random House, 1963).

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

accepts, that Nietzsche rejects equally unconditionally—and this difference makes all the difference between the two thinkers.

Nietzsche's perception of Jesus of Nazareth and Christianity is complex, therefore, and requires some explanation. For Nietzsche seems to reject wholesale the Pauline invention "Christ" and the institutions of Christianity that this fabrication made possible. His attitude toward Jesus the evangel is more bivalent, on the other hand: there is a sense, Nietzsche acknowledges, in which Jesus' teaching and *praxis* of unconditional love does represent a successful attempt to overcome priestly domination, does represent a successful challenge to the ritualistic dependence upon law and theologico-juridical norms generally; but it remains a flawed attempt, in the final analysis, one unalive to its own origins in the phenomenon of *ressentiment*, in reactive resentment.

Jesus and Paul: Evangel and Dysangel

Perhaps the clearest image of Jesus unburdened by Pauline trappings to be found in Nietzsche's writings occurs in sections 28 to 35 of *The Antichrist*. "This 'bringer of glad tidings' died as he had lived, as he had taught—*not* to 'redeem men' but to show how one must live. This practice is his legacy to mankind . . . to resist not even the evil one—to *love* him."[4] Nietzsche insists repeatedly that what the historical Jesus bequeathed to humankind was not a doctrine of redemption, and certainly not salvation after death, but love as the unconditional form of life:

> It is not a "faith" that distinguishes the Christian: the Christian *acts*, he is distinguished by acting *differently*. . . . He broke with the whole Jewish doctrine of repentance and reconciliation; he knows that it is only in the *practice* of life that one feels "divine," "blessed," "evangelical," at all times a "child of God." Not "repentance," not "prayer for forgiveness," are the ways to God: *only the evangelical practice* leads to God, indeed, it *is* "God"! The deep instinct for how one must *live*, in order to feel oneself "in heaven," to feel "eternal," while in all other behavior one decidedly does *not* feel oneself "in heaven"—this alone is the psychological reality of "redemption." A new way of life, *not* a new faith.[5]

4. A, sec. 35.
5. A, sec. 33.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Everything one has typically come to identify with Christianity—God as person, the son of God, the kingdom of heaven, salvation, the trinity, the immortality of the soul, sin, guilt, repentance, faith, and the power of prayer—all are for Nietzsche alien to the life and legacy of Jesus of Nazareth. So it follows for Nietzsche that

> The concept of "the son of man" is not a concrete person who belongs in history, something individual and unique, but an "eternal" factuality, a psychological symbol redeemed from the concept of time. The same applies once again, and in the highest sense, to the *God* of this typical symbolist, to the "kingdom of God," to the "kingdom of heaven," to the "filiation of God." Nothing is more unchristian than the *ecclesiastical crudities* of a god as person, of a "kingdom of God" which is to come, of a "kingdom of heaven" beyond, of a "son of God" as the second person in the Trinity. All this is—forgive the expression—like a fist in the eye—oh, in what an eye!—of the evangel—a *world-historical cynicism* in the derision of symbols.[6]

But if "father" and "son," "the kingdom of heaven," and "the kingdom of God" are not the crude ecclesiastical symbols they have generally been taken to be, what *are* they symbols of? What *do* they symbolize for the historical Jesus? Here, too, Nietzsche speaks unequivocally, speaks with a direct voice:

> . . . the word "son" expresses the *entry* into the over-all feeling of the transfiguration of all things (blessedness); the word "father" expresses *this feeling itself*, the feeling of eternity, the feeling of perfection. . . . The "kingdom of heaven" is a state of the heart—not something that is to come "above the earth" or "after death." The whole concept of natural death is lacking in the evangel: death is no bridge, no transition; it is lacking because it belongs to a wholly different, merely apparent world, useful only insofar as it furnishes signs.[7]

Perhaps Nietzsche's most startling but significant subtraction from the more standard picture is the elimination of the concepts of guilt and punishment from the psychology of the evangel as well:

> In the whole psychology of the "evangel" the concept of guilt and punishment is lacking; also the concept of reward. "Sin"—any dis-

6. A, sec. 34.
7. Ibid.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> tance separating God and man—is abolished: *precisely this is the "glad tidings."* Blessedness is not promised, it is not tied to conditions: it is the only reality—the rest is a sign with which to speak of it. . . .[8]
>
> True life, eternal life, has been found—it is not promised, it is here, it is *in you*: as a living in love, in love without subtraction and exclusion, without regard for station.[9]

It would be a mistake to infer, however, that Nietzsche's attempt to liberate the historical Jesus from subsequent ecclesiastical trappings is motivated by admiration. For Nietzsche, Jesus remains decadent. Indeed, in discussing the psychology of the Redeemer-type, he suggests that Jesus' psychology is governed by an instinctive hatred of reality. Just as there is a pathological tactile state characterized by shrinking from physical contact of any kind, including grasping solid objects, so Nietzsche suggests that "One should translate such a physiological *habitus* into its ultimate consequence—an instinctive hatred of every reality, a flight into 'what cannot be grasped,' 'the incomprehensible,' an aversion to every formula, to every concept of time and space, to all that is solid, custom, institution, church; a being at home in a world which is no longer in contact with any kind of reality, a merely 'inner' world, a 'true' world, an 'eternal' world. 'The kingdom of God is *in you*.' "[10] Indeed, Nietzsche summarizes what he calls the two physiological realities out of which the doctrine of redemption arose in a very suggestive aphorism, number 30:

> *The instinctive hatred of reality*: a consequence of an extreme capacity for suffering and excitement which no longer wants any contact at all because it feels every contact too deeply.
>
> *The instinctive exclusion of any antipathy, any hostility, any boundaries or divisions in man's feelings*: the consequence of an extreme capacity for suffering and excitement which experiences any resistance, even any compulsion to resist, as unendurable *displeasure* . . . and finds blessedness (pleasure) only in no longer offering any resistance to anybody, neither to evil nor to him who is evil—love as the only, as the *last* possible, way of life. These are the two *physiological realities* on which, out of which, the doctrine of redemption grew.[11]

8. A, sec. 33.
9. A, sec. 29.
10. Ibid.
11. A, sec. 30.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Nietzsche's image of Jesus, then, is almost that of Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin—the "idiot" with whom Nietzsche identifies Jesus in aphorism 29 of *The Antichrist*—and Nietzsche expresses his regret "that a Dostoevsky did not live near this most interesting of all decadents—I mean someone who would have known how to sense the very stirring charm of such a mixture of the sublime, the sickly, and the childlike."[12]

Nietzsche's observation that even a deecclesiasticized, deconstructed Jesus remains decadent is not argued for in *The Antichrist*. It is merely asserted there; and we shall have to look elsewhere to find Nietzsche's justification for such an ascription, justification for the view that despite its contrast with historical Christianity, original, apostolic Christianity too is nihilistic. Yet Nietzsche hints at the basis for such an evaluation quite early in *The Antichrist*:

> I have drawn back the curtain from the *corruption* of man. So much so that I experience this corruption most strongly precisely where men have so far aspired most deliberately to "virtue" and "godliness." *I understand corruption, as you will guess, in the sense of decadence: it is my contention that all the values in which mankind now sums up its supreme desiderata are decadence-values*. . . . Where the will to power is lacking there is decline. It is my contention that all the supreme values of mankind *lack* this will—that the values which are symptomatic of decline, *nihilistic* values, are lording it under the holiest names.[13]

The following points need to be stressed here in a preliminary sort of way, since they will be mentioned again later: Nietzsche, like Marx, really seems to have believed sincerely that his talk about decadence, corruption, nihilism, and the like is intended to be morally neutral. The justification for that claim will emerge later; for now, however, it may be worth pointing out that Nietzsche seems to have believed that his corruption-talk is nonnormative, much as Marx seems to have believed that much of his talk about oppression, capitalist plunder, shackles, chains, and exploitation is also descriptive and, hence, not a rhetorical condemnatory device. A further point to observe is that Nietzsche identifies corruption with decadence, and identifies both with humankind's highest values. Neither Jesus nor Christianity is picked out for exclusive censure; rather, the sustaining and informing values of humankind have all been deca-

12. A, sec. 31.
13. A, sec. 6; my italics.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

dence-values, Nietzsche asserts here. The history of our highest aspirations is the history of nihilism. Finally, one should not take lightly Nietzsche's identification of nihilism with a sublimated instinct of self-destruction, nor his conclusion that the loss of an instinctual vitality reappears as a counterfeit "under the holiest names." The highest values hitherto—identified elsewhere by Nietzsche as "the ascetic ideal"—have been thanatological values dressed up in life-affirming disguise.

If Jesus of Nazareth, the deconstructed "idiot," is defined in part by an instinctive hatred of reality, he is also a "holy anarchist"—he is nevertheless a solution to the problem of the rule of the priestly class, of rabbinic domination:

> Jesus has been understood, or *misunderstood*, as the cause of a rebellion; and I fail to see against what this rebellion was directed, if it was not the Jewish church. . . . It was a rebellion against "the good and the just," against "the saints of Israel," against the hierarchy of society—*not* against its corruption, but against caste, privilege, order, and formula; it was the *disbelief* in the "higher man," the No to all that was priest or theologian. . . .
>
> That holy anarchist who summoned the people at the bottom, the outcasts and "sinners," the chandalas within Judaism, to opposition against the dominant order . . . was a political criminal insofar as political criminals were possible at all in an absurdly unpolitical community.[14]

If "that holy anarchist," that impertinent and unintentional champion of the rabble against all forms of authority, was to have a lasting impact, however, his life—which *was* his "glad tidings"—had to be remythologized. The apostolic anticleric had to be transvaluated if "Christianity would become master over *beasts of prey*."[15]

In a clever series of steps Nietzsche argues that the notion of a "moral world order" had to be invented to reinstate priestly authority: "From now on all things in life are so ordered that the priest is indispensable everywhere; at all natural occurrences in life, at birth, marriage, sickness, death, not to speak of 'sacrifices' (meals), the holy parasite appears in order to denature them—in his language: to 'consecrate.'"[16] And the most powerful instruments for the reascendancy of the priest are the notions of sin and guilt: "the

14. A, sec. 27.
15. A, sec. 15.
16. A, sec. 26.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

priest rules through the invention of sin."[17] "Psychologically considered, 'sins' become indispensable in any society organized by priests: they are the real handles of power. The priest *lives* on sins, it is essential for him that people 'sin.' Supreme principle: 'God forgives those who repent:—in plain language: those who submit to the priest.' "[18] Indeed, as Nietzsche reads post-Nazarene Christianity, the entire scaffolding of its ideology, the entire redemptive drama, is designed to retain the power of the priestly class, born of *ressentiment*: " 'Last Judgment,' 'immortality of the soul,' and 'soul' itself are instruments of torture, systems of cruelties by virtue of which the priest became master, remained master."[19] So the history of Christianity, Nietzsche argues, is the history of an error—a misunderstanding in which the original symbolism of Jesus becomes transvaluated into a crude ecclesiastical tale, a tale that becomes as vulgar as the slave's mentality that seeks revenge in and through it: "the history of Christianity, beginning with the death on the cross, is the history of the misunderstanding, growing cruder with every step. . . . The destiny of Christianity lies in the necessity that its faith had to become as diseased, as base and vulgar, as the needs it was meant to satisfy were diseased, base, and vulgar. In the church, finally, *diseased barbarism* itself gains power."[20]

The figure most responsible for the emergence and triumph of Christianity as "diseased barbarism" is Paul, of course; and "Paul was the greatest of all apostles of vengeance,"[21] says Nietzsche, for "in Paul the priest wanted power once again—he could use only concepts, doctrines, symbols with which one tyrannizes masses and forms herds."[22] Of course, the soil had been prepared for Paul's revaluation by Jesus' disciples. Jesus' death on the cross—a punishment typically reserved for "the rabble"—presented his disciples with the suspicion that Jesus' manner of death constituted a refutation of their cause. Since "a disciple's love knows no accident,"[23] as Nietzsche says, Jesus' life and death became transfigured in a world-historical misunderstanding. Nietzsche states the case nicely as follows:

17. A, sec. 49.
18. A, sec. 26.
19. A, sec. 38.
20. A, sec. 20.
21. A, sec. 45.
22. A, sec. 42.
23. A, sec. 40.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> Evidently the small community did *not* understand the main point, the exemplary character of this kind of death, the freedom, the superiority over any feeling of *ressentiment*. . . . After all, Jesus could not intend anything with his death except to give publicly the strongest exhibition, the *proof* of his doctrine. But his disciples were far from *forgiving* this death—which would have been evangelic in the highest sense—or even from offering themselves for a like death in gentle and lovely repose of the heart. Precisely the most unevangelical feeling, *revenge*, came to the fore again. The matter could not possibly be finished with this death: "retribution" was needed, "judgment". . . . Once more the popular expectation of a Messiah came to the foreground; a historic moment was envisaged: the "kingdom of God" comes as a judgment over his enemies.[24]

Jesus, as Nietzsche deconstructs him, had set aside notions of guilt, sin, and atonement; but the ludicrous image of Jesus crucified required, step by step, notions of sin and atonement once again, and of the doctrine of resurrection, above all. And Paul seizes on this resurrection requirement above all else. "Paul, with that rabbinical impudence which distinguishes him in all things, logicalized this conception . . . in this way: '*If* Christ was not resurrected from the dead, then our faith is vain.' And all at once the evangel became the most contemptible of all unfulfillable promises, the *impertinent* doctrine of personal immortality."[25]

Thus, through Paul, Jesus the evangel is transvaluated, becoming the Redeemer, the dysangel. "On the heels of the 'glad tidings' came the *very worst*: those of Paul. In Paul was embodied the opposite type to that of the 'bringer of glad tidings'. . . . *How much* this dysangelist sacrificed to hatred! Above all, the Redeemer: he nailed him to *his own* cross . . . he *invented his own history of earliest Christianity* . . . he falsified the history of Israel that it might appear as the prehistory of *his* deed. . . . At bottom, he had no use at all for the life of the Redeemer—he needed the death on the cross *and* a little more."[26] The "little more" Paul needs to gain supremacy is the notion of the potential immortality of each and every soul, ultimate democratization of and through the spiritual realm:

24. Ibid.
25. A, sec. 41.
26. A, sec. 43.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> That everyone as an "immortal soul" has equal rank with everyone else, that in the totality of living beings the "salvation" of *every* single individual may claim eternal significance . . . such an intensification of every kind of selfishness into the infinite, into the *impertinent*, cannot be branded with too much contempt. And yet Christianity owes its triumph to this miserable flattery of personal vanity: it was precisely all the failures, all the rebellious-minded, all the less favored, the whole scum and refuse of humanity who were thus won over to it. The "salvation of the soul"—in plain language: "the world revolves around *me*."[27]

Many commentators have observed, quite rightly, that for Nietzsche democracy and socialism—as well as nationalism and world wars—would have had a different etiology without the triumph of Christianity as a Pauline invention. And throughout *The Antichrist* Nietzsche remarks repeatedly on the political consequences of the triumphal slaves' morality. For example, "The aristocratic outlook was undermined from the deepest underworld through the lie of the equality of souls; and if faith in the 'prerogative of the majority' makes and *will make* revolutions—it is Christianity, beyond a doubt, it is *Christian* value-judgments, that every revolution simply translates into blood and crime."[28] Further, Christianity ultimately undermines any distinction in rank or merit through a "tarantula" morality in which the base inveigh against nobility. "Christianity is a rebellion of everything that crawls on the ground against that which has *height*: the evangel of the 'lowly' *makes* low."[29] And, "The poison of the doctrine of 'equal rights for all'—it was Christianity that spread it most fundamentally . . . out of the *ressentiment* of the masses it forged its chief weapon against *us*, against all that is noble, gay, high-minded on earth, against our happiness on earth. 'Immortality' conceded to every Peter and Paul has so far been the greatest, the most malignant attempt to assassinate *noble* humanity."[30]

Flattered, self-congratulatory conceit born in and nurtured by resentment finds expression in Pauline Christianity, mocks noble values and converts the "noble" into the "evil" ones. But this self-congratulatory conceit veils itself as modesty, as humility, argues Nietzsche. "What really happens here is that the most conscious *conceit of being chosen* plays modesty: once and for all one has placed oneself,

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the 'community,' the 'good and the just,' on one side, on the side of 'truth'—and the rest, 'the world,' on the other."[31] In *The Antichrist* the distinction between life-affirming, noble, nondecadent values, on the one hand, and life-denying, base, decadent values is couched in the language of a contrast between "aristocratic" and "chandala" moralities. This contrast, in substance and form, mirrors Nietzsche's earlier contrast between "base" and "noble" moralities, adumbrated in *Beyond Good and Evil* and in *Toward the Genealogy of Morals*. As is well known, Nietzsche's portrait of the rise of moral valuations painted a "twofold early history of good and evil."[32] This theme of Nietzsche's, that there is such a twofold early history of morals—and two fundamentally opposed moral perspectives that correspond to and arise out of this history—is basic. Mention of the two primary types of morality that he had discovered was first made explicit by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*: he called them "master morality and slave morality."[33]

The bare sketch of master and slave moralities presented in *Beyond Good and Evil* is amplified in *Toward the Genealogy of Morals*, where the concepts are deepened and rendered more systematic. For one thing, the notion of resentment, *ressentiment*, is given prominent display and functions as just precisely the sort of explanatory tool that is needed to account for moral attitudes and beliefs. The concept of resentment is then also used to explain why Christianity is slave morality sanctioned and incarnate.

Nietzsche begins with two types, the aristocratic master and the servile slave, in a secular context. The master is, and his morality extols, autonomy, independence, power, self-control, pride, spontaneity, and passion. The self-directed master derives his values not from the community, not from "the herd," but from the abundance of his own life and strength. The slave, however, fears the strength and power of the master. He despises him. He is dependent, powerless, without self-direction, discipline, or self-control. To seize control over his own psychic destiny, the slave must curb and tame his master; he must displace him, in a sense. And the method of "overcoming" the master and his morality, the means to his displacement, is to render the values of the herd absolute and universal: "The revolt of the slaves in morals begins with resentment becoming creative and giving birth to values."[34] The revolt of the slave in moral

31. A, sec. 44.
32. MA, I, sec. 45.
33. J, sec. 260.
34. GM, I, sec. 10.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

matters is indeed creative and resentful. Powerless to effect a fundamental change in his condition, he wreaks vengeance against the master by converting the master's attributes into vices. And while master morality sanctions coexistence with inferior types and morals—so long as the baser ones keep their assessments to their own kind—the resentment of the slave yearns for universality. Nothing may escape its moral clutches alive. Nietzsche does not suggest, of course, that the slave's resentment of and revenge against the master is either direct or conscious. Far from it.

It is in this context, the context of moral-psychological imperialism, that the slave's resentment is to be understood. Since the slave cannot displace the master in reality, he avenges himself symbolically, mythically. Enter the religion of the slave—Christianity. Whatever else Christianity may be for Nietzsche—and as I have argued above we should not forget that it *is* many things besides—it is first of all the ideology of slave morality. It expresses the slave's resentment against the attributes of master morality by vilifying them. The virtues of the master become "sin." In place of power, it is said that the meek are to inherit the earth. Pride is sin. Humility is virtue. Charity, chastity, and obedience displace self-reliance, spontaneity, and autonomy. And it is said that it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a "rich" man to pass into the kingdom of heaven.

The resentment of slave morality that finds expression in Christianity is at once virulent and fateful: virulent, because its moral imperialism is of unprecedented scope. Its "moral" dictates are meant to cover all men at all times. Denied the actual gratification of supremacy over the master, it condemns him symbolically—but for eternity. He is condemned to hell. The scope of the sanction is "eternity." Apart from its virulence, Christian slave morality is fateful—in that it introduces into the Western psyche something virtually ineradicable: consciousness of sin and guilt.

Superman: Ideal or Attitude?[35]

Many commentators have observed that Nietzsche's rejection of Jesus and Christianity in *The Antichrist* presupposes what it needs to

35. The discussion that follows appears in modified and enlarged form in my "Perfectibility and Attitude in Nietzsche's Übermensch," forthcoming in *The Review of Metaphysics*.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

show: that an instinctive hatred of reality coupled with a sublimated will to power lies at the root of both phenomena. This is particularly troublesome in the case of Jesus, as Nietzsche deconstructs him, because the ascription of decadence is never argued for. Thus many commentators, Walter Kaufmann for example,[36] have attributed to Nietzsche the view that Jesus' Myshkin-like innocence is simply naive, a flight from reality in its fulsome and sometimes painful aspects. Jesus is typically contrasted unfavorably with Socrates: in such a scenario Socrates becomes health embodied, and an object of Nietzsche's unequivocal admiration.

I find this view unhelpful; and I propose instead that we take Nietzsche's image of the superman as the contrast term, rather than Socrates. Thus, Nietzsche's failure to argue for his vision of "health" in *The Antichrist* before vivisecting Jesus and Christianity is a consequence both of the fact that Nietzsche's image of nonnihilistic human beings is presupposed, and of the further assumption that Nietzsche always thought of his writings in contexts, thought that his readers would connect theses advanced in one book with those previously advanced in another.

Let us approach the contrast between Nietzsche's Jesus and superman obliquely, then, by looking now at the notion of the superman, just as we concentrated on Jesus above.

The standard construal of Nietzsche's superman has a long, sometimes lurid, history; only a few paradigm expressions of the "ideal type" reading—the reading that sees Nietzsche's superman as a human ideal, as the image of human perfectibility—need be cited here as a way of assembling reminders. And it may also be well worth remembering at the outset that Nietzsche himself entered an acerbic barb in *Ecce Homo* against those who would construe the concept denoted by the term *Übermensch* as the embodiment of a type of higher species of human being:

> The word "Übermensch," as the designation of a type of supreme achievement, as opposed to "modern" men, to "good" men, to Christians and other nihilists—a word that in the mouth of a Zarathustra, the destroyer of morality, becomes a very thoughtful word—has been understood almost everywhere with perfect innocence in the sense of those very values whose opposite Zarathustra was meant to represent—that is, as an "idealistic" type of a higher kind of man, half "saint," half "genius". . . . Those to

36. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950, 1969, 1974).

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> whom I said in confidence that they should sooner look even for a Cesare Borgia than for a Parsifal, did not believe their own ears.[37]

Yet despite Nietzsche's own cautions, the superman has generally been construed as a heroic ideal, as a higher type who must be bred by all-too-human humankind, as the great man, the superior individual whose self-perfection—half genius, half saint—places him at a far remove from the mediocrity and stagnation of the crowd, the rabble, "the herd"; he has also been understood as the nonconforming immoralist, and as the value-legislator whose values express his own authentic self-possession.

Very early, indeed during Nietzsche's lifetime, he was beset by those who would breed a superman. His sister, for example, gives us the following account of her brother's intention, in her own 1906 introduction to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

> The phrase "the rearing of the *Übermensch*" has very often been misunderstood. By the word "rearing," in this case, is meant the act of modifying by means of new and higher values—values which, as laws and guides of conduct and opinion, are now to rule over mankind . . . a new table of valuations must be placed over mankind—namely, that of the strong, mighty, and magnificent man, overflowing with life and elevated to his zenith—the *Übermensch*, who is now put before us with overpowering passion as the aim of our life, hope, and will. And just as the old system of valuing, which only extolled the qualities favorable to the weak, the suffering, and the oppressed, has succeeded in producing a weak, suffering, and "modern" race, so this new and reversed system of valuing ought to rear a healthy, strong, lively, and courageous type, which would be a glory to life itself. Stated briefly, the leading principle of this new system of valuing would be: "All that proceeds from power is good, all that springs from weakness is bad." This type must not be regarded as a fanciful figure . . . it is meant to be a possibility which men of the present could realize with all their spiritual and physical energies, provided they adopted the new values.[38]

37. *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Write Such Good Books," sec. 1. This reference to Cesare Borgia has often been taken out of context to argue that Nietzsche admired the Borgias, even that he regarded (some of) them as supermen. Attention to context, of course, renders such claims dubious. Nietzsche's point here is that, among all of the *implausible* candidates, a Parsifal-like character is even more implausible than a Cesare Borgia. This is consistent with Nietzsche's view that there is no point in commending involuntary eunuchs for their celibacy, or cowards for their restraint.

38. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, Introduction to *Thus Spake* (*sic*) *Zarathustra* in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, 1927), p. xxi.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

It might seem trivial to quote these lines of the thoroughly discredited Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche; but we ought to remind ourselves that such an interpretation of the superman—as a power-monger who legislates new values to humankind—is scarcely a thing of the past. Consider, for example, J. P. Stern's recent influential appraisal:

> He (i.e., Nietzsche) seems unaware that he is giving us nothing to distinguish the fanaticism that goes with bad faith from his own belief in the unconditioned value of self-realization and self-becoming—that is, from his own belief in the superman. We for our part are bound to look askance at this questionable doctrine. We can hardly forget that the solemn avowal of this reduplicated self—the pathos of personal authenticity—was the chief tenet of fascism and National Socialism. No man came closer to the full realization of self-created "values" than A. Hitler.[39]

Prof. Stern's reading of Nietzsche as presented in his 1978 Modern Masters series Penguin book did not change when his 1979 Cambridge University Press publication appeared: in *A Study of Nietzsche* he repeats these lines verbatim.[40] The Nietzsche who emerges from the latter monograph is a preacher of a doctrine of "heroic commitment," of existential self-realization, of self-assertion without moral restraint or inhibition, and all this in opposition to the inherited Judaeo-Christian ontology and moral philosophy. Most distressing of all, perhaps, the Nietzsche here depicted is a proto-fascist ideologist (unwitting, to be sure)—the very distortion that Walter Kaufmann's pioneering work had successfully debunked. Consider, lamentably: "If there is anything in the recent 'Nietzschean' era that comes close to an embodiment of 'the will to power,' it is Hitler's life and political career."[41] And then the *coup de grace*: "Indeed, the 'power' which is the will's goal need not be conceived in any such barbaric ways as the Italian and French fascists and the German national socialists conceived of it (*though it cannot be denied that the intellectual superstructure of these political movements is as inconceivable without Nietzsche's ideas as these movements are without their superstructure*)."[42] While I read and reread these elusive and yet profoundly regressive lines, the image of Adolf Eichmann in the docket at Jerusalem—blurting out a vulgarized version of *Kant's* moral philosophy as his self-justifica-

39. J. P. Stern, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1978), pp. 85–86.

40. Approximately two-thirds of J. P. Stern's *A Study of Nietzsche* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979) is a verbatim repetition of the 1978 Penguin book, *Friedrich Nietzsche*.

41. Ibid., p. 120.

42. Ibid., p. 122; my italics.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tion—haunted me like a shadow. The point is that reading Nietzsche's writings as the perhaps unwitting superstructure for fascist ideologies and practice has once again descended upon us, and not only in publications of distinguished university presses. If there remains any doubt about this I recommend that you look at what sometimes passes for journalism these days: as in the 8 June 1981 issue of *Der Spiegel*, for example, where editor Rudolf Augstein has written a lengthy article on Nietzsche and Hitler. The magazine's cover depicts Nietzsche in the pose of Rodin's "The Thinker" with Hitler rising from his head brandishing a pistol. The upper left-hand corner carries the thematic article lead "Recurrence of a Philosopher"; the lower right-hand corner conveys the point in large, bold italics: "Doer Hitler, Thinker Nietzsche."

To be sure, there is a strain in Nietzsche that invites such readings. The apocalyptical facade and rhetoric of much of Nietzsche's peroration about the superman does indeed appear menacing, especially when taken out of context, a fact with which more scholarly and sensitive commentators have had to contend. Consider, for instance, the tenor of this note from the *Nachgelassene Fragmente* from the period 1885–86:

> From now on there will be more favorable preconditions for more comprehensive forms of domination, whose like has never yet existed. And even this is not the most important thing, the possibility has been established for the production of international racial unions (*Geschlechts-Verbänden*) whose task will be to rear a master race (*Herren-Rasse*) the future "masters of the earth";—a new, tremendous aristocracy, based on the severest self-legislation, in which the will of philosophical men of power and artist-tyrants will be made to endure for millennia—a higher kind of man who, thanks to their superiority in will, knowledge, riches, and influence, employ democratic Europe as their most pliant and supple instrument for getting hold of the destinies of the earth, so as to work as artists upon "man" himself. Enough: the time is coming when politics will have a different meaning.[43]

And in a note penned earlier, in 1884, one finds:

> I write for a species of man that does not yet exist: for the "masters of the earth. . . ." In Plato's *Theages* it is written: "Each one of

43. *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), n. 960.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

us would like to be master over all men, if possible, and best of all God." This attitude must exist again.[44]

The above passages are not cited to lend credibility to any right-wing reading; as a rule, appropriate attention to the status (published or *Nachlaß*) and context of Nietzsche's notes is sufficient to dispose of such interpretations. They are referred to primarily in order to remind myself that what I am calling the "ideal type" reading of Nietzsche's superman need not always be benign. After all, monstrous crimes against humanity are, to my knowledge, never understood in such terms by their perpetrators. Rather, as Stanley Cavell has observed, "someday, if there is a someday, we will have to learn that evil thinks of itself as good, that it could not have made such progress in the world unless people planned and performed it in all conscience."[45] And that may perhaps be the most telling point against understanding the superman as a value-legislator who simply embodies a new, albeit a "higher," morality. For Nietzsche is not primarily intent upon erecting a new morality, a new set of values upon the ashes of the old tablets; rather, his philosophizing beyond good and evil means to deny not only morality but with it the basis for a contrast with *immorality* as well. To put this differently: it is the moral perspective itself, the foundation upon which distinctions between good and evil may be said to rest noncontextually, that Nietzsche has deconstructed. For Nietzsche denies morality much as he denies alchemy—not saying that there are no alchemists or that there have never been alchemical motives, but calling into question the presuppositions that make alchemy possible. And so it is with "morality." In the second book of *Morgenröte* (*The Dawn*) Nietzsche writes:

> Thus I deny morality just as I deny alchemy; that is, I deny their presuppositions; however, *not* that alchemists have existed who believed these presuppositions and behaved in terms of them. I also deny immorality: *not* that countless men *feel* themselves to be immoral, but rather that there be a foundation in *truth* that one should feel this way. I do not deny that which is self-evident—presuming that I am no fool—that many acts which are called immoral are to be avoided and fought against, and that many which are called moral are to be done and encouraged. I do mean: *the*

44. Ibid., n. 958. It has long been agreed that *Theages* was written not by Plato but by an imitator of Plato.

45. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 136.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> *one, as well as the other, but on other grounds than before*. We must learn to transform our thoughts (*umzulernen*), in order at last, perhaps very far from now, even more to reach the point at which we transform our feelings (*umzufühlen*).[46]

Fortunately, by no means all "ideal type" readings have stressed the alleged political consequences of *Übermenschlichkeit*, of what it is like to be a superman. Perhaps the most popular interpretation of the superman is the one articulated so successfully in the English-speaking world by the late Walter Kaufmann:

> The unphilosophic and inartistic mass remain animalic, while the man who overcomes himself, sublimating his impluses, consecrating his passions, and giving style to his character, becomes truly human or—as Zarathustra would say, enraptured by the word *über—super*human.[47]

> The *Übermensch* . . . is the "Dionysian" man who is depicted under the name Goethe at the end of the *Götzendämmerung* (IX, 49). He has overcome his animal nature, organized the chaos of his passions, sublimated his impulses, and given style to his character—or, as Nietzsche said of Goethe: "he disciplined himself to wholeness, he *created* himself" and he became "the man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength," "a spirit who has *become* free."[48]

This construal of the superman as creative self-perfection has also been endorsed by philosophers of markedly differing temperaments and orientations. Consider the following assessment from Arthur Danto's pen: "The *Übermensch*, accordingly, is not the blond giant dominating his lesser fellows. He is merely a joyous, guiltless, free human being, in possession of instinctual drives which do not overpower him. He is the master and not the slave of his drives, and so he is in a position to make something of himself rather than being the product of instinctual discharge and external obstacle."[49]

But precisely this reading of *Übermenschlichkeit*, of what it is like to be a superman, defeats Nietzsche's originality in its triumph. For what we are left with is a most unoriginal formula of sorts:

46. M, sec. 103.

47. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, p. 312.

48. Ibid., p. 316. Kaufmann's pioneering work has, ironically, only now been translated into German, by the Nietzsche scholar Jörg Salaquarda.

49. Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 199–200.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> A sultry heart plus a cool head, minus the human-all-too-human. But this, divorced from the extravagant language and the rushing cadences of Zarathustra's singing, turns out to be a bland and all-too-familiar recommendation, rather squarely in a moralistic tradition. It says only that we should seek to keep our passionate as well as our intellectual life in our command, not to deny one at the price of the other, and that we should not be petty and "merely" human. It is something of an irony that Nietzsche is least original where he has been most influential. Here is an ancient, vaguely pagan ideal, the passions disciplined but not denied, in contrast with the life and attitude of guilty celibacy which has been an official moral recommendation until rather recent times.[50]

If we were to insist upon construing the superman as an ideal type, and at the same time wished to rescue Nietzsche from the charge of having overdramatized a cliché—namely, Aristotle's megalopsychic man—we could of course assimilate *Übermenschlichkeit* to the notion of authenticity. While there may be something to recommend this maneuver, one suspects that everything depends upon how the notion of "authenticity" gets spelled out. For, after all, Heidegger's own early political perception of authentic individuals is scarcely helpful.

The main contrast I wish to mark in this section is between the "ideal type" reading and the attitudinal or diagnostic reading of the superman. This contrast is not as sharp, nor is it as clear, as one should like it to be; nor is it an all-or-nothing affair. But what I have in mind when I refer to the attitudinal interpretation is that it does *not* necessarily emphasize the superman as an ideal of human perfectibility, an ideal that could be realized if only we were to do something or other—such as to sublimate our impulses, consecrate our passions, spiritualize our instincts, give style to our character, or live authentically—assuming all the while, of course, that we would know how to begin to *do* any of these things. Instead, I take the superman to be the *nonspecific* representation, the underdetermined embodiment if you will, of a certain attitude toward life and world—the attitude that finds them worthy of *infinite* repetition. On this reading, then, the frequently voiced lament that the superman is left vague by Nietzsche and is never portrayed adequately is not a defect: it is, rather, the necessary consequence of the fact that what is being portrayed is not a set of character traits nor an algorithm telling us how, what, and when to choose. Indeed, if the concept of the super-

50. Ibid., p. 199.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

man can be read usefully at all as a *diagnostic* rather than a prescriptive concept, one would expect its embodiment to be radically underdetermined, just as a description of a Rorschach inkblot inevitably would be.

This diagnostic reading has been defended in some detail, especially in my *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*.[51] Perhaps one need repeat here only the minimum that is necessary in order to spell out the internal connection between the superman notion and eternal recurrence. Allow me, therefore, to repeat one thrust of the thesis concerning Nietzsche's remarks about eternal recurrence. Eternal recurrence, in its principal sense, is offered by Nietzsche as an illustration of the attitude of *Übermenschlichkeit*, of what it is like to be a superman: it illustrates the being-in-the-world—the basic attunement—of the *Übermensch*. I do not mean to suggest that it is one possible attitude among many possible ones; it is *the* attitude *simpliciter* that Nietzsche wishes to portray if passive and active nihilism are to be overcome. This attitude toward life is the opposite of decadence, decline of life, world-weariness. It is the attitude of affirmation, of overfulness; the attitude that expresses ascending life, life as celebration, life in celebration.

If the thought of eternal recurrence is called into service to tell us what a certain attitude is like, what celebrating life *feels* like, we must not forget Nietzsche's other point—that attitudes toward life are to be read as symptoms of the condition of the person having the attitude. Attitudes toward life are self-reference clues. This is stated with exceptional force and clarity in the frequently cited portion of *Twilight of the Idols* that deals with "The Problem of Socrates," especially section 2: "Judgments of value, concerning life, for or against it, can, in the end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms, they are worthy of consideration only as symptoms . . . *the value of life cannot be estimated*." It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this point for Nietzsche, or at least for my reading of him. Increasingly for me *everything* depends on reading Nietzsche bifocally: as committed to no *particular* world-version, or vision of human perfectibility, in his metaphilosophical critique of philosophy, while at the same time urging particular versions and visions, and attacking particular idols. If one takes seriously Nietzsche's suggestion that the value of life cannot be estimated and that assessing it is, therefore, to be read only as a symptom, one gets both levels at once, I think.

51. Bernd Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978).

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

What Nietzsche affirms and denies is always radically historically conditioned, variable in principle on this reading—and self-referring; but the larger self-referential thesis is itself not variable in principle. Thus the attitude toward life captured in the eternal-recurrence vision is the expression of nihilism already overcome. The ecstatic attitude expressed is the attitude toward life captured by the superman. Simply put, again, eternal recurrence expresses the attitude of *Übermenschlichkeit* and is the being-in-the-world of supermen.

Concerning this question of attitude, then, one might usefully construe diagnostically Nietzsche's statement that his teaching says the task is to live in such a way that one must wish to live again. Notice that Nietzsche does not appear to say or imply that recurrence should be thought of as true in order that we may accept our proper task. Live in such a way that you must wish to live again, he tells us simply. Whether or not one's life is worthy of infinite repetition here seems to become Nietzsche's principle of selection and redemption. But there are no spectators to decide these matters: I cannot tell you whether what you are and do is such that you must wish to be it and do it again, nor can you be my judge. Here, perhaps, the strongest divergence from Kant's categorical imperative surfaces. A central point of the Kantian thrust is to subsume judgments about individual actions under rational, moral law; the moral law speaks no private language. Yet Nietzsche's eternal recurrence seems to be deliberately pluralistic: "My teaching declares: the task is to live in such a way that you must wish to live again—you will *anyway*! To whom striving gives the highest feeling, let him strive; to whom rest gives the highest feeling, let him rest; to whom ordering, following, obedience give the highest feeling, let him obey. *May* he only become aware of *what* gives him the highest feeling and spare no means! Eternity is at stake!"[52] On the "ideal type" construal of *Übermenschlichkeit*, what it is like to be a superman, to judge something or someone worthy of *infinite* repetition, is to prize and praise a specific something, a certain way of living, a specific trait or form of life. But Nietzsche does not seem to say that. Become aware of that which is worthy of infinite repetition in your life, whether that be striving or reposing, ordering or obeying, he tells us. The important thing is to become aware of what is worthy of infinity in our lives. And about these things we surely will differ.

There is of course a sense in which Nietzsche's existential impera-

52. WKG, V-2, 403; aphorism II [164]. This note was penned at about the time that the "discovery" of eternal recurrence occurred, in August 1881.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tive—live in such a way that you must wish to live again—*does* choose among types, does choose among lives and what have recently come to be called life-styles. For even if we cannot distinguish life-affirmers from life-deniers by looking at what they affirm or deny, *they* may nevertheless be able to see *whether* they affirm or deny. Recall, if you will, Nietzsche's first published aphorism concerning eternal recurrence, from *The Gay Science*:

> *The greatest stress.* What if one day or night a demon were to sneak after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you, "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you—all in the same succession and sequence. . . ." Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him, "You are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly." If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would transform you, as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?" would weigh upon your actions as the greatest stress. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* (*um nach nichts mehr zu verlangen*) than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?[53]

It is easy to see from this aphorism's hypothetical diction ("what if . . .") why the normative interpretation of Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence should have gained widespread currency. From a modified perspective, however, we need primarily to emphasize the *conclusion* of this aphorism. How well disposed would we have to become, have to *be*, toward life, toward our lives and the world, in order to affirm eternal recurrence? How life-affirming indeed would one have to be to crave *nothing* more fervently than eternal recurrence?

On a superficial level, of course, it may be easy to say Yes to Nietzsche's demon. After all, given the alternative—death with no afterlife—who would hesitate? I think the right answer is that virtually all of us would or should give pause. For how many persons can assert without self-deception that they crave nothing more fervently

53. FW, IV, sec. 341.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

than the eternal recurrence of each and every moment of their lives? Moreover, to affirm, to appropriate eternal recurrence would not only require a nonselective affirmation of one's existence—present and past[54]—but by implication would commit its affirmer to preferring his or her life to any and all other possible lives. To crave *nothing*, absolutely nothing, more fervently than the ultimate confirmation and seal of eternal recurrence for one's life seems to exclude preferring the life of another. And my hunch is that just as each of us would affirm the eternal recurrence of our lives only selectively—omitting this or that pain, regret, or humiliation—virtually none of us would fervently prefer our lives to all other possible lives. Who, for example, would not prefer to be God, if he were still alive?

The point of these remarks may now be clearer. A superman—and only a superman—would be so well disposed to himself and the world that he would crave *nothing* more fervently than the eternal repetition of his life, not even the life of God or the gods. What it would be like sincerely, non-self-deceptively, and nonpathologically to have such an attitude only supermen (and perhaps Nietzsche) know. I certainly don't. However, this confession should not be taken as a sign of paralysis, an indication that something has gone wrong with our analysis. For although we may not know what it is like to have the attitude of a superman as our most basic and defining disposition, and even though we cannot easily infer *Übermenschlichkeit* from another's behavior, most of us have in fact experienced that tremendous moment of which Nietzsche's demon speaks in "The Greatest Stress." Virtually all of us have at one time or another experienced a tremendous moment whose repetition we would will unto eternity were this within our power, and for the sake of which we would exchange our lives for no other. Artists at work in every medium have been known at one time or another to experience that enormous satisfaction when their work achieves (their standard of) perfection, when they would not trade places with gods. The mystical literature of East and West is full of descriptions of yearned-for ecstatic states that are perceived as the unique and irreplaceable goal of human longing. Less esoterically, it is said that the agony of the long-distance runner is sometimes replaced—after "the wall" has been "hit"—by an incredible sense of euphoria, well-being, and achievement, for which no other experience is an adequate substitute. Most mundane of all, perhaps, human sexual satisfaction can

54. The most forceful statement may be found in Z, II, "On Redemption" (*Von der Erlösung*).

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

sometimes be so intense and rewarding that one would will its eternal repetition, and exchange lives with none at that instant.

These illustrations are tricky, to be sure. Some may be inclined to argue that artistic, religious, athletic, and sexual peak experiences—or "highs," if you prefer—are seldom if ever without self-deception or pathology. We need not enter that debate here, however; for the burden of the remark is not that we know what it is like to achieve *Übermenschlichkeit*, to achieve superhumanity, but only that we may on rare occasions perceive it as through a glass darkly.

One thing is clear, however. If the value of life cannot be estimated, if, that is to say, estimates of life's ultimate value and significance function as the conceptual equivalent of the psychologist's Rorschach tests, then systematic world-views—religious, moral, metaphysical—must also be read as symptoms of the condition of the person who articulates cosmic estimates. And Nietzsche never doubted that the Christian prescription, when viewed in this self-referring light, is incapable of the joyous self-affirmation of the superman, because its dualism is born of resentful decadence.

This content downloaded from 91.181.33.226 on Wed, 17 Jun 2026 14:18:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms